

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

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TO: Local Health Officers,
Local Disease Control Officers, and
Directors of Environmental Health

FROM: Environmental Management Branch and
Disease Investigations and Surveillance Branch

SUBJECT: Annual Mussel Quarantine Ends at Midnight on October 31, 1999

We thank you for your assistance and cooperation in the prevention of paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) in California. James W. Stratton, M.D., M.P.H., State Health Officer, has announced that the annual quarantine for sport-harvested mussels will end at midnight on October 31, 1999. Extensive sampling of mussels has confirmed that shellfish-borne toxins are presently at safe or undetectable levels at all locations in the State.

Press Releases

The Department of Health Services (DHS) will issue a press release announcing the end of the annual mussel quarantine to all major news services in California. A copy of the DHS release will be sent to you as soon as it is available. Your assistance is requested to ensure that this announcement receives coverage in your area. A background information summary is provided with this memo for your use in preparing local press releases and answering inquiries.

Placards

Quarantine placards (or the quarantine notice itself) should be removed from display at all stores, bait shops, dive shops, public parks and access points, and similar locations along the coast.

Shellfish Toxins Monitoring Program

We ask that all coastal county health departments participate in the shellfish biotoxin monitoring program. This voluntary effort is particularly critical during the annual quarantine months of May through October. In the last major PSP outbreak in 1980, the sudden appearance of illnesses in July came without warning because few coastal shellfish samples had been submitted for analysis. Since 1980, certified commercial shellfish harvesters have been required to submit weekly samples to DHS for analysis during all harvesting periods.

If illness and deaths from PSP are to be prevented, it is essential to have periodic sampling data from other locations, especially along the open coast, where mussels may commonly be harvested despite quarantine warnings. Coastal mussel samples also are essential because they provide early warning information needed to keep clam and cockle beds open during the quarantine period. If an adequate coastal monitoring program is not maintained, it may be necessary to quarantine all species of sport-harvested bivalve mollusks, not just mussels, during the May through October period or even longer.

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Coastal county health authorities also are invited to participate in a unique volunteer-based phytoplankton monitoring program now being conducted by the Department's Environmental Management Branch. Early detection of toxin-producing phytoplankton can alert DHS to potentially dangerous toxic blooms before shellfish resources are impacted.

All coastal county health departments and other sampling program participants receive a monthly and an annual summary of all shellfish testing results for the entire coast of California.

Shellfish Information Line

The Department's Shellfish Information Line, with recorded updates on shellfish biotoxins and quarantines, has a toll-free telephone number at 1-800-553-4133.

If you have questions about any of these matters, please feel free to call Gregg W. Langlois, coordinator of the EMB Biotoxin Monitoring Program, at (510) 540-3423, or S. Benson Werner, M.D., Chief, Disease Investigations Section of the Disease Investigations and Surveillance Branch, telephone (510) 540-2566.